

ISIS and the “War Makes States Path”

Samantha Anthony

Sophomore, Global Studies and German

Introduction

Many political scientists and academics have posited theories on state formation. Perhaps one of the most well-received and venerated theorists on this topic is Charles Tilly. Tilly’s “war makes states” theory, also called the Bellicist theory, is widely accepted as the theory of state creation in Western Europe. After the theory’s publication, the majority of the political science community applied this theory to different regions and groups that experience violence, such as the violence the Middle East experiences at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). At its height, ISIS controlled large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, with an estimated ten million people living under its rule. ISIS, in its methodology and patterns, mirrors Tilly’s theory. If given enough time, ISIS will follow Charles Tilly’s long-term “war makes states theory” and form its own sovereign and legitimate state. This paper proceeds as follows. Charles Tilly’s theory will be discussed and elucidated. Then this theory will be applied to the workings of ISIS, specifically the four activities that lead to state formation. Finally, the paper will evaluate the potential of a future legitimate ISIS.

Theory

Charles Tilly’s “war makes states” theory applies to the formation of states in western Europe specifically. The article, published in 1985, is situated in the broader world of “historicism,” which regards historical events and trends as the basis for states and the policies made by their leaders. Tilly asserts over the span of twenty pages that “war making and state making - quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy - qualify as our largest examples of organized crime.”¹ Tilly explains and supports the previous statement by writing that the creation of states in western Europe evolved over hundreds of years through the activities of organized crime and their tendency to practice protection rackets. These groups then evolved into legitimate governments and states via the monopolization of violence and the means of coercion within their borders. It is important to note that this evolution of these groups into states is both an unintended consequence and a centuries-long process.

Tilly then posits that there are four specific stages to this process of state making: a stage of anarchy and plunder, where the groups are simply criminal organizations; a stage in which these groups attract merchants and other people to give tribute in exchange for protection; a stage in which these merchants gained more from the protection than the governments did from tribute; and a stage in which entrepreneurs make more profit from technological changes than tribute. This last period is recent. The most important aspect that

pushes these groups from criminal organizations to governments is legitimacy. A state is only formed when the groups gain legitimacy. This legitimacy occurs when the threat of violence from outside forces becomes real rather than imaginary, and when the groups are mutually recognized as legitimate by other governments.² Then and only then, is the group a state.

Charles Tilly then applies this idea to different states in different historical periods. He furthers his thesis by asserting that governments or protection rackets carry on in a cycle with four steps. Step one is war making, where these groups neutralize rivals outside their borders. Step two is state making, where they neutralize rivals inside their borders. Step three is protection, where they neutralize both the real and imaginary threats of their clients and citizens. Lastly is extraction, wherein the group obtains the means for the first three via tribute, and later taxation. Tilly concludes that this process is how states in western Europe were formed, and that his theory relates to the formation of new states.³ As stated above, Tilly's theory is widely accepted as the basis for Western European state formation, but many political scientists have applied this theory to other regions, with mixed results. Miguel Centeno and Jeffrey Herbst applied the theory to Latin America and Africa, respectively. While the histories of these regions mean that the theory does not apply in totality, certain aspects are applicable outside of Western Europe, and they help in conceptualizing new and forming states throughout the world. This paper will apply

his theory to the Middle East, specifically the case of ISIS and its path to state formation.

Application

The roots of ISIS trace back to the 2004 rise of the terror group Al Qaeda in Iraq, the Iraqi branch of the international terror group Al-Qaeda. Al Qaeda in Iraq's aim was to topple the western placed regime and replace it with a Sunni Islamist government. In 2006, Abu Ayyub al-Masri took over as leader and renamed the group the "Islamic State of Iraq". However, after the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 between rebel forces and the government, ISIS gained power by taking advantage of the long-standing instability in the region and claiming territory. They then renamed themselves ISIS after expanding.⁴ From then on, ISIS began their reign of terror, proclaiming their intent to form a Sunni Caliphate on a "wide swath of territories ranging from the east of Aleppo to . . . Anbar, Nineveh, and Mosul in Iraq."⁵ If given enough time, ISIS will follow Tilly's trajectory to form a state. ISIS has just entered the second stage of merchantry and tribute, although they still have a long way to go before statehood. However, over time, ISIS could very well move through all four stages to become a state. To further elucidate this idea, this paper will continue by looking at how ISIS has engaged in war making, state making, protection, and extraction, respectively, as well as how they could become legitimate and sovereign.

ISIS engages in war making, and has done so for quite some time. In addition to their conflict with Syrian and Iraqi forces, ISIS attempts to neutralize threats outside the borders they have designated for their ideal state. ISIS has managed to morph into “simultaneously a terrorist outfit, a guerilla organization, and a quasi-conventional force” aimed at removing any outside influences in the region.⁶ ISIS makes international war by attempting to overthrow the Sykes-Picot agreement and the colonial forces in the region.⁷ This takes the form of conventional combat with international forces, such as the United States, but more prevalently, in the form of international terrorist attacks aimed at destroying outside enemies. ISIS is “entering into the arena of state formation and nation building by seeking to destroy the existing . . . states and [building] a new entity.”⁸ Although not through conventional warfare, ISIS engages in war making with the intent of building power, which will in time contribute to its state formation.

In addition to war making, ISIS engages in state making, the second aspect in the cycle of state activity. It is important to note that state making requires borders, since the definition is that the group in question neutralizes threats within their borders. However, this still applies to ISIS in that ISIS has declared its borders and is actively attempting to “[erase] the current borders in the middle east . . . established with the Sykes-Picot agreement.”⁹ I would argue strongly that, although ISIS does not have internationally recognized and

sovereign borders, it performs the early stages of state making by attempting to monopolize the means of coercion within the borders it has set for itself, therefore preventing its rivals from using “similar tools of violence that would otherwise threaten it.”¹⁰ This means that the intra-state enemies neutralized are Syrian, Iraqi, and other Middle Eastern forces. In state making, ISIS focuses on the near enemy rather than the far enemy. If ISIS continues in this pattern, the borders that they set for themselves may well become actualized territory.¹¹ This would mean that the state would become sovereign, which has a few ramifications. If the ISIS state was sovereign in the Westphalian sense, it would have control of physical territory, autonomy from other states within that territory, mutual recognition by other states of that territory, and the ability to control what happens within their territory. These principles would contribute greatly to ISIS forming a full state.

The third of the four activities that ISIS engages in as it moves towards statehood is protection of its citizens. This process requires the most evolution before ISIS has a hope of realizing statehood. The group itself would have the world believe that it provides for those living under its control. ISIS-produced propaganda, such as its English language magazine “Dabiq”, solidifies the loyalty of its citizens by creating a sense of kinship while also identifying a Shia threat and a Western threat.¹² This concept is evident in propaganda videos, wherein ISIS details the

capability for the welfare of its citizens while also stressing the need for protection from both enemies near and far.¹³ ISIS has had success in this regard, in that the sense of community and extremist ideology they preach has drawn people to its side.¹⁴

While ISIS posits that their protection is legitimate and their citizens are happy, there is evidence to the contrary. ISIS is still in the very early stages of statehood regarding this factor. The criminal organization that utilizes terror to seize power and control, and the environment created by their violence forces people to “turn to the group to ensure their survival”, resulting in a citizenry that did not necessarily “[agree] with their ideological vision or . . . violent tactics.”¹⁵ However, ISIS does engage in state making process that supports its move toward statehood. In 2015, an ISIS published document was uncovered outlining administrative guidelines for a state. With relation to protection, ISIS has plans for a Qur’anic Constitution, the appointment of officials, “special teams deployed for fundamental change in the structuring of the regions that are subject to the rule of the Islamic State,” an organized education system, and the protection of its borders.¹⁶ This document outlines the group’s desire to establish an actualized society that protects its citizens from threats, such as the existing governmental structures of Iraq and Syria. ISIS is not yet legitimate in its protection; however, state formation and legitimacy takes centuries. There is a strong possibility

that in time, the welfare and protection provided will become valid.

The last part of Tilly’s state making cycle is extraction, or when a group or government takes goods, services, or money to pay for the previous sections. In its controlled territory, ISIS has set up a hierarchical bureaucracy which includes “a number of ministries, including finance, transport, security, foreign fighters, and media.”¹⁷ ISIS uses this bureaucracy to gather resources from the people under its power, a system that is morphing from tribute to taxation. This signals a move from criminal organization to government. ISIS is attempting to establish state institutions to collect taxes, and they also proclaim their need for particular jobs, as evidenced by the first issue of Dabiq.¹⁸ Additionally, other evidence for extraction comes from the aforementioned ISIS document. Details include provisions for the financial well-being of the state such as preservation of infrastructure; placing specialists for the “production directorates in the Islamic State including establishments of oil, gas, archaeological areas and factories for manufacturing and production”; relying on external business; and collecting taxes.¹⁹ However, as is the case with ISIS ‘protection,’ this extraction technique has a long way to evolve before statehood, despite what the group itself claims. ISIS is still a criminal organization, “[wringing] money out of those who live under its control,” with few seeing the benefits.²⁰ And while ISIS may claim that this is because the war takes precedence, the real reason is because ISIS

has a long way to go before statehood. However, ISIS remains on Tilly's "war makes states" trajectory.

It is important to note that recent territorial losses for ISIS do not necessarily point to the failure of the theory. ISIS is still prevalent in the region, and there remains the strong possibility for it to become a legitimate state over time. Many people in the region suffer due to the violence and instability of the area, providing ISIS with "legitimacy of the worst alternative."²¹ ISIS is on the path towards legitimacy, and over time may well become a legitimate and internationally recognized state. Conceptualizing what this means is critical to understanding ISIS' path. Being a legitimate authority means that there is the "probability that other authorities will act to confirm the decisions of a given authority."²² Applied to the situation at hand, ISIS would then be legitimate when surrounding authorities supported and did not act against the nation. This means that international authorities, domestic authorities, and the people in ISIS controlled territory would no longer act against ISIS' authority, but would instead recognize it as a real and legitimate power with monopolized means of coercion. ISIS is on this path because many people recognize and uphold its authority. Those who do not realize at the very least that ISIS is a strong actor in the

region. Although ISIS is not recognized as a state yet, the international community recognizes it as a threat that continues to monopolize the means of violence. However, once ISIS authority is recognized and unopposed, especially by international actors and other state, they will gain the legitimacy needed to become a state. These analyses point to the fact that ISIS is moving towards statehood.

Conclusion

If it continues on the trajectory it is on, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq will follow Charles Tilly's "war makes states" model. This theory is one of the most widely accepted concepts in political science today, especially when applied to Western Europe, as Tilly himself states. This process takes centuries, yet the way in which ISIS engages in war making, state making, protection, and extraction will result in its eventual statehood if given enough time. Despite recent territorial losses, ISIS is still prevalent in the Middle East and continues to engage in state formation activities. While it is important to remember that this process is still in the very early stages of criminal racketeering, there is still a distinctly strong possibility that ISIS will reach statehood in the future.

NOTES

¹ Tilly, Charles. Bringing the State Back In, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 169-186.

² Tilly 179.

³ Tilly 180.

⁴ Staff. "ISIS: Facts and Summary." *History.com*. A+E Networks, 2017, www.history.com/topics/isis. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.

⁵ Saouli, Adam. Back to the future: the Arab uprisings and state (re)formation in the Arab world, *Democratization*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2015, 11.

⁶ Hashim, Ahmed S. The Caliphate at War: Ideology, War Fighting and State-Formation, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2016, 11.

⁷ Mabon, Simon., Nationalist Jāhiliyyah and the Flag of the Two Crusaders, or: ISIS, Sovereignty, and the "Owl of Minerva", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 40, no. 11, 2017, 4

⁸ Hashim, 7.

⁹ De Sarto, Raffaella. Contentious borders in the Middle East and North Africa: context and concept, *International Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 4, 2017, 2

¹⁰ Saouli 5.

¹¹ Krasner, Stephen D. Rethinking the Sovereign State Model, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, 2001, 17-42.

¹² Mabon 3.

¹³ Mabon 7.

¹⁴ Aras, Bülent and Emirhan Yorulmazlar. State, region and order: geopolitics of the Arab Spring, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 12, 2016, 11.

¹⁵ Mabon 5.

¹⁶ ISIS. "Principles on the Administration of the Islamic State." Syria: ISIS, 2015. Web. 12 Dec. 2018.

¹⁷ Mabon 9.

¹⁸ Mabon 11.

¹⁹ ISIS Document.

²⁰ Hashim 13.

²¹ Hashim 15.

²² Tilly 5.